Short Stories from

جانب: Pawesome Elementary School 🐶🐾🐱🐾

For C.A.N.I.N.E.S. (Children Articulating Needs in Novel Elementary Settings)

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Author’s Note

These little stories were inspired by a combination of readings in educational philosophy or pedagogy and experiences with kids.

The first story, “Seeing and Hearing,” can hardly be said to have a specific point of origin: in nearly every classroom, instructions have to be repeated multiple times! My co-teacher and I were struggling during EDUC 4040 (Engaging Students in Learning) to actually keep our students engaged in learning. It was an after-school program so the students had already had a long day of school, and attention easily wandered. Dr. Duff’s solution of keeping students engaged with Universal Design for Learning is represented in the first story. The experience taught me that an easy, but often-overlooked, way to keep students engaged is by representing information in multiple ways.

The second story was inspired by an experience I had as a tutor with REACH and readings that I learned about in EDUC 2710 (the Sociopolitical Context of Education), and EDUC 3405 (Multicultural Education). I tutored a girl, D, who was the only black student in her honors history class and was considering dropping it because she felt the students and teacher were against her and none of her friends were in the program. She felt like she did not belong, that is, based on her race. Simultaneously I was learning about structured inequality in schools like at Berkeley High School (Noguera and Wing et al 2008). Sometimes teachers unwittingly reinforce negative stereotypes of minority students when they do not address name-calling, as Varma-Joshi (2004) points out. That verbal violence can paralyze students and is detrimental to their schooling experience. Teachers have a responsibility to notice and address it; Varma-Joshi said many teachers did not realize racialized name-calling was taking place or did not take it seriously. (I should point out that while I chose to have different species of animals in the story, I recognize that people with different shades of skin are still very much of the same species! The analogy for children’s stories is not perfect.) Many people in the United States, and I was one of them before taking the education minor at Cornell, do not know the extent of structured inequality in school where minority students are discriminated against. So while it may seem like an obvious point, I learned that teachers should be vigilant about seeing and preventing discrimination in classrooms, even when it takes place in subtle ways and seems “harmless,” as the saying “…but names shall never hurt me” goes. This is because if they do not stop racism, it can prevent students like D from feeling like they have an equal place of belonging in school.

The third story came about after learning about Duncan-Andrades’ and Reyes’ critical pedagogy in Multicultural Education and the Zone of Proximal Development in Educational Psychology. The story is loosely based on my experience in EDUC 2410 (The Art of Teaching), when I taught a lesson to a group of middle-school students in a Family and Consumer Science class. I started with what they knew in two ways: asking them to associate a concept with other concepts they knew, and then had them come up with examples of the concept. In spite of increasing standardization and commonality among curriculum, I learned it is still important to start with students’ knowledge (of both an academic and experiential nature).

When I wrote these stories, I had in mind that my younger cousins might be able to read them with a parent or teacher. Perhaps these stories – with fine-tuning, of course – could start conversations between parents, students, and teachers. My hope is that teachers would be inspired to create a classroom that uses UDL, that prevents discrimination, and that uses familiar knowledge as a starting point for learning. Perhaps by hearing these stories, students too can begin the process of metacognition to think about what environment and pedagogy help them learn best.

Thank you for reading!
Seeing AND Hearing is Believing

Miss Kitty was still a brand-new teacher when she got to Pawesome Elementary School. Thankfully, she had Mr. Tom to help her. The first day of class, she stood at the front of the classroom with Mr. Tom.

“Hello, class!” she said. “I’m Miss Kitty.”
“And I’m Mr. Tom,” joined in Mr. Tom.
“Hi, Miss Kitty. Hi, Mr. Tom,” the class responded dutifully.
“And what are your names?” Miss Kitty wanted to know, looking at the shiny sheet of names. There was Beatrice Bloodhound, Frank Feline, Murphy Mole, Owen Owl, and Tiffany Turtle. She read off every name.

“Here!” said Beatrice, raising a paw.
“I’m here!” announced Frank, waving his paw enthusiastically.
“Me too,” Murphy said, raising a paw, and squinting in the direction of the side of the classroom where he thought his teacher was standing. (“Over here, Murphy,” said Mr. Tom. “Oh!” said Murphy, blushing a little and facing his teachers.)
“Present,” declared Owen, lifting a wing.
“What?” Tiffany poked her head out of her shell and blinked. After Miss Kitty said her name again, Tiffany replied, “Here!”

With the last check marked on her attendance sheet, Miss Kitty gave her class a big smile. “Welcome, everyone. For our first day of class we are going to talk about water, something that is important to all of us here.”

Mr. Tom pointed on the board to where he had made a very nice diagram of the water cycle. It had every part of the cycle, including fluffy white clouds drawn with chalk.

“The what?” Tiffany said.
“The water cycle,” Owen repeated. “It’s right there!”
“Oh, I see it,” Tiffany said. She wished that she had big ears like Beatrice Bloodhound did, but she just couldn’t hear as well.

“I don’t see it!” piped up Murphy. He had heard Miss Kitty perfectly, but he wished that he had Owen Owl’s big eyes so he could see it too.

Miss Kitty was wishing that she had spoken a little louder or that Mr. Tom had drawn the diagram a little bigger. It was only her first day of class and already her students were confused!
“It’s okay,” Mr. Tom said, looking at Miss Kitty and then back at his students. “How about this – I will talk about what the water cycle does, and Mr. Tom will point to each part of the cycle on the diagram?”

“I can hear you,” Murphy nodded.

“And I can see you!” Tiffany said.

“Me too!” said Beatrice.

“So can I,” said Owen.

Frank looked up from where he had been flexing his claws and admiring them. “Wait. What are we talking about?” he asked, retracting his claws again.

Everyone laughed.

“The water cycle,” Miss Kitty reminded him with a smile and a little sigh.

“I don’t like water very much,” Frank decided. Some of the orange hair on his back was starting to stand up.

“I do!” Tiffany insisted. “I swim every day!”

Miss Kitty said, “Alright, everyone, we can all have our own opinions on swimming. But think of how important water is. It goes into the ground to make plants that we eat or give oxygen.”

“Here it is going through the ground,” Mr. Tom pointed out, tapping his paw on one part of the diagram he had drawn. Everyone looked at where he was tapping his paw. Even Frank, who had been looking out the window, paid attention when he heard and saw Mr. Tom tapping the board.

“I like plants,” Frank commented.

“Alright, Frank,” Mr. Tom said patiently. “We have a lot more to talk about. Ready?”

Frank nodded. So did Beatrice, Murphy, Owen, and Tiffany.

“And water comes from the sky too, in little puddles,” added Miss Kitty, “so you can drink from it.”

Mr. Tom pointed at the diagram where he had drawn rain falling from the fluffy clouds.

“We need some rainy days and some sunny days to give us plants,” Miss Kitty said.

“Some plants need more water, and some plants need more sun.”

“Just like some of us need to hear and some of us need to see, in order to learn,” Mr. Tom added.

Miss Kitty nodded happily. “And we are all still growing!”

Since she had just learned one way that she could keep all of her students from being confused, Miss Kitty knew she was growing, too.

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After all their students had gone home for the day, Mr. Tom and Miss Kitty talked about how their first day of teaching had gone.

“Showing the information in two ways like that was a great idea!” Miss Kitty enthused.

“Some students learn better through hearing information, and some students learn better through seeing information,” said Mr. Tom. “So the best way for us to teach everyone is to do both.”

“I like it! Where did you learn how to do that?”

“It’s an idea called Universal Design for Learning,” explained Mr. Tom. “The name comes from the universe having space for everyone, because Universal Design for Learning means having a classroom where everyone can learn.”

Miss Kitty nodded thoughtfully. “That makes sense. Thank you for teaching me, Mr. Tom!”
Everybody Counts

After their math lesson one day, all the students went out to play. All the students, that is, except Murphy.

Murphy moved slowly toward the door of the classroom.

“Murphy? Are you okay?” Miss Kitty asked.

After a sigh, Murphy shrugged. (That was not a good sign.) “I dunno. I guess.”

“I was disappointed you didn’t do your math homework, Murphy,” Miss Kitty started carefully. It was not like Murphy to miss assignments.

Instead of answering, Murphy just shrugged again.

Miss Kitty waited a minute. “If something is wrong, you know you can tell me.”

Murphy looked down. “Miss Kitty…” He frowned a little, staring very hard at his shoes.

When Murphy did not say anything after that, Miss Kitty said gently, “It’s okay, Murphy.

You can be honest.”

“I shouldn’t have to tell you,” Murphy burst out. “You don’t notice.”

“…Notice what, Murphy?” Miss Kitty asked slowly. She was getting worried.

“Tiffany wrote a note to me yesterday that I’m just a… a dirt-digger and said her sister said moles can’t do math because they spend all their time underground.”

Miss Kitty frowned. “Oh, that isn’t true.”

“Then why didn’t you call on me yesterday?” Murphy asked.

Surprised, Miss Kitty blinked. She had thought that she called on everyone equally! “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. I didn’t even notice you were raising your paw!”

“I was! But you called on Owen. Just like always.”

Now that she thought about it, she did call on Owen a lot. She hadn’t realized she was doing it, but now that she did realize, she knew it was wrong. “I’ll make sure to call on you next time.”

Owen scuffed his paws on the floor. “But what if I get the problem wrong? I always get it wrong. …Maybe I am just a dirt-digger.”

“No, Murphy, don’t say that,” Miss Kitty insisted. “We’re learning some things that are difficult, that’s all. I know you can do it.”

“But Tiffany said—”

Miss Kitty decided she was going to have a talk with Tiffany.

“I’m sorry she said that,” Miss Kitty said. “You can do math. If you need extra help we can talk at lunch or after school, okay? Everyone needs help sometimes.”

Murphy didn’t look like he totally believed his teacher. “Even Owen and Tiffany?”

“Yes,” Miss Kitty said. “And even me, too.”

“Really?”

“Yes! On my first day of school, Mr. Tom had to help me, remember?”

Tiffany’s words made Murphy fear he could not do math because he is a mole.
“Oh yeah.” Murphy smiled, just a little. If Miss Kitty got help and Miss Kitty was old, then it was probably okay for him to get help, too.

Miss Kitty gave Murphy a hug. He was feeling a little better.

“I know that note hurt your feelings,” Miss Kitty said, looking at Murphy seriously. “It was very wrong, and I am sorry I did not notice it.”

Murphy gave a little nod. Now that Miss Kitty knew what the other students were calling him, he hoped they would be nicer to him.

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After school that day, Miss Kitty waved Tiffany over.

“Tiffany, can I talk to you?”

“Okay…”

“You wrote some unkind things about Murphy in a note,” said Miss Kitty. “They weren’t true, but they made him feel very bad.”

Tiffany’s green cheeks looked white. “But we were all doing it,” she said quickly. “It wasn’t just me!”

“It was still wrong,” Miss Kitty said. “Remember at the beginning of the year, we wrote rules on the wall.” She pointed to the board that had the class rules written on it. “One of the rules was that we would all respect each other. The way you treated Murphy was not respectful.”

Tiffany pulled her head back into her shell. “I’m sorry, Miss Kitty.”

“Now that you know it was wrong, I don’t want you – or anyone – to say things like that, okay?”

“I won’t. I promise,” Tiffany said.

“And you should tell Murphy you’re sorry.”

Tiffany nodded.

“Murphy needs friends who believe in him, not make him feel bad,” Miss Kitty explained. “We all do.”

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After that, Miss Kitty was more careful about calling on all of her students when they had their wings or paws raised. She also kept her eyes and ears open for students who were breaking the class rule of being kind to each other. She knew that being called names could hurt very badly.

From then on, Murphy and Tiffany were good friends. Murphy did his math homework every day and even raised his hand in class sometimes.

“A more confident Murphy wants to help solve a math problem.
“Alright, class,” Miss Kitty began. “You know that in this class, we learn about things that you can use in your everyday life. Today, we will learn about something very important.”

“Is it water?” Tiffany guessed hopefully. She was proud of herself for remembering what they had discussed a few days ago. And she would not easily forget about water.

“No, though that is a good guess,” Miss Kitty said, while Frank looked relieved that they were not talking about water. “We are talking about something called resilience.”

“Re-what?” Beatrice asked, perking up her ears so she could hear the word better.

Miss Kitty smiled. “Resilience. Yes, it is a big word. But don’t worry – I bet you already know what it is.”

Murphy raised his eyebrows. “We do?”

Miss Kitty nodded. She just had to start with something that they already knew and build from there. “Here’s a hint: it is something like perseverance or endurance. Who can tell me what those words mean?”

Owen raised his wing.

“Yes, Owen.”

“It’s when you keep going,” Owen said.

“That’s right,” Miss Kitty confirmed. “It’s when you keep going, even when something is hard. Resilience is being able to get up and keep going after something hard happens to you.”

Frank looked thoughtful. “Ooh, I do know that!”

“For example,” Miss Kitty continued, “you are being resilient if you fall down during a race but you get up and start running again to finish.”

Tiffany thought of a time she had lost a swimming race, but she didn’t want to share because she didn’t want anyone to think she was slow. And at least she had persevered like Miss Kitty said and kept swimming.

“Who wants to share an example of a time you or someone you knew was resilient?” Miss Kitty asked. “You don’t have to share anything too personal if you don’t want to.”

She gave the students a minute to think about their answer. Everyone was quiet, even Owen.

Finally, she said gently, “Murphy, I haven’t heard from you yet. Would you like to share?”

Murphy scrunched up his nose. “Um… There was the time that my burrow collapsed,” he said. “I had to help my mom and dad build it again.”

Miss Kitty nodded sympathetically. “That was very resilient of you, Murphy. Your family went through something hard but you got up and built a new burrow.”

“I got a bad grade on a test, once,” Owen admitted. “But then I studied harder for the next one.”

“Good,” Miss Kitty said. “I mean – it isn’t good that you got a bad grade, but you recovered! If you hadn’t been resilient, you would have just kept being sad about it, right?”

Owen nodded. Thinking about it made him a little sad still, but he had mostly forgotten about it in everything that happened since. And he did want to be resilient.

Now that they had talked about how they had been resilient, Owen and Murphy both realized that they did know what it meant.

“Are you re… re-sil-i-ent, Miss Kitty?” Beatrice wanted to know, carefully pronouncing the word.

Miss Kitty smiled. “I think so. But lots of animals have come back from worse things than I have. I wanted to talk to you about two in particular.”

And so Miss Kitty told her class about two animals who had faced very bad things – one had been chased by a very large bear, and survived - and had gone on to do very great things.
She was happy her students were able to understand what it meant to persevere because they had already seen what it looked like.

“I want you to remember these stories, and remember the ways that you have stayed strong,” Miss Kitty told her class. “Because sometimes hard things and sad things will happen in life. But I know you are strong enough to keep going.”

As Miss Kitty looked at the students she loved so much, she hoped they never had to go through those hard and sad things. She did believe though that they could be resilient, and she was glad that she had been able to teach them something that they knew from their lives and that they could use in their lives in the future too.

Miss Kitty’s “pawesome” students: Beatrice, Murphy, Tiffany, Owen, and Frank.

And as hard as teaching was sometimes, knowing that she might have helped her pawesome students made it all worth it.